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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the processes and outcomes of family decision-making during children's transition from late childhood to adolescence. Members of 28 one-parent families and 40 two-parent families completed four decision tasks independently, then as a family. Decision tasks concerned selecting a bicycle, a snack, a movie, and a camp for the child. After making individual decisions, family members were asked to reach consensus on the same decisions. Influence was measured by correspondence between an individual's original decision and the joint decision. Joint family decision-making was tape-recorded, coded and analyzed by means of aspects of Halweg's Interaction Coding System as incorporated into Bales' Interaction Process Analysis. All family members used similar sources of information when making decisions, but their level of influence on family decisions differed. Children in one-parent families had more influence than those in two-parent families, and children's influence varied by gender and age-group. Preliminary analyses of family discussions about the joint decision tasks indicated that family configuration and age were not systematically related to family decision processes. It is concluded that researchers may need to rethink the role of parental influence in the development of children's decision-making skills. Information should be targeted at specific gender and age groups. (RH)

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Family Decision-Making in Early Adolescence: Conversations and Choices

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Abstract

This study investigated the processes and outcomes of family decision-making during the transition from late childhood into adolescence. Members of 28 one-parent families and 39 two-parent families completed four decision tasks independently, then as a family. All family members used similar sources of information when making decisions, but their level of influence on family decisions differed. Children in one-parent families had more influence than those in two-parent families, and children's influence varied by gender and age-group. Preliminary analyses of family discussions surrounding the joint decision tasks indicated that family configuration and age were not related to family decision processes in a systemmatic way.

Recent concern about adolescent decision behaviors has resulted in large media and educational campaigns to teach adolescents strategies for making wise choices. However, we know little about what kinds of information adolescents are likely to use to make everyday choices, and how they learn to select information to guide their decisions. Previous research indicates that the transition from late childhood into adolescence is the period during which parents begin to give their children more autonomy in decision-making (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Hill, 1980; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), but children continue to seek their parents' advice about particular kinds of decisions (Kandel & Lesser, 1972; Lerner et al., 1975). Therefore, the transition into adolescence is expected to be a critical time during which adolescents develop strategies for making decisions. The goal of this study was to investigate both the processes and outcomes of family decision-making about routine topics during the transition from late childhood into adolescence.

Although decision-making by adolescents has been a topic of concern to developmental psychologists, the research has primarily been focused on cognitive changes in the individual child or on the influence of the peer group. Although both lines of inquiry are critical to our understanding of the development of decision-making skills, they leave out a major source of influence--the family. Therefore, we tried to study the way in which individual

cognitive processing (information selection) may be influenced by the family. Studying decision-making within the family is important because decisions made within that context are unique, because unlike decisions made alone or within the peer group, all members have a long history with each other and power and resources of the individual members are inherently unequal. Everyday decisions made by a family may provide an arena in which fledgling decision-makers try their new skills, and where more experienced decision-makers model appropriate behavior or even provide instruction on how to make decisions.

Previous Research

Previous research on the development of decision-making within the context of the family indicates that, as children pass from middle childhood into early adolescence, they typically experience more autonomy to make their own decisions and are allowed to participate more in family decisions. Yee and Flanagan (1985) found that 7th-8th graders reported more opportunities for decision-making than did 4th-5th graders. Similarly, Yee (1984) found that junior high students reported more participatory and self-regulating family environments than did middle school students. Grotevant and Cooper (1982) found a trend toward increased autonomy for decision-making in adolescence. With a slightly older sample (aged 12-17) of 6,710 adolescents and their parents, Dornbusch, et al., (1985) reported that joint decision-making increased in middle adolescence and

then declined. They attributed this to a "practice period" which preceded full autonomy in decision-making. Based on the above findings, we expected to find that adolescents had greater input into the decision process and into the final decisions than did pre-adolescents in our study.

In addition to age, the effects of family configuration and sex of the child on the development of decision-making have been considered. Weiss (1976) suggested that one- and two-parent families may differ because "the two-parent family [is] characterized by an 'echelon' structure in which adults reinforce one another's rules and right to decide. In contrast, this echelon structure does not characterize the single-parent family and children in these homes are pulled into an earlier maturity, taking increased decision-making, personal chaperonage, and responsibility in the household." This idea has been supported by studies reporting higher autonomy by adolescents and less control by parents in single parent families (Dornbusch, et al, 1985; Flanagan, 1987). Thus, we expected children in single parent families to influence family decisions more than children in two-parent families.

Another influence on decision-making that has been considered is gender. Many of the studies already mentioned investigated gender. In general, they found that females had more opportunity for decision-making than males (Yee & Flanagan, 1985), and reported more participation in family decisions for females than males (Flanagan, 1990; Yee,

1987). In our study, we expected to find similar gender differences, but we thought that they might interact with age so that females experienced decreasing autonomy as they entered adolescence (as reported by Grotevant & Cooper, 1986).

Most of the studies reviewed above have used self-reports of parents and/or adolescents to identify decision-making patterns. The measures have asked about either general decision-making strategies (typically using Epstein & MacPartland's Family Decision-Making Scale, 1977) or have asked who made most of the decisions for a particular topic (e.g., choosing the child's clothes) (Dornbusch, et al., 1985). Although we have learned a great deal about families' self-perceptions of their decision-making, self-reports are limited to what respondents are aware of and may be biased for a variety of reasons. One notable exception to self-reports is Cooper and Grotevant's (1984) analysis of family's discussions concerning a life-like decision (planning a family vacation). This was an open-ended task, without outside constraints. We decided to try to capture the nature of the child's role in family decision-making by asking family's to complete four decision tasks. We tried to make the tasks as life-like as possible by making them choices between events or objects because most decisions in life are already constrained by what is available (e.g., we make a choice between movie A or movie B rather than designing a movie we would like to see). In addition, we

asked family members to rank order the possible choices individually first, so that they would come to the joint task with an opinion because we believed that for a real family discussion, members come with opinions about a desired outcome (e.g., I want to see movie A or I won't go to see movie B because I don't like that kind of movie). Finally, we collected data on both the outcomes of their decisions and on the interactions that went into making the decisions in order to better understand the process of decision-making.

A critical component of individual judgment and decision-making highlighted by recent literature is the way in which information is selected and processed. A number of studies indicate that young and mid-adolescents are more likely than children to generate options, to look at the situation from a variety of perspectives, to anticipate consquences of decisions, and to evaluate the sources of information (see Mann, Harmoni, & Power, 1989 and Keating, in press for reviews). The transition occurs at about age 12. Most of the studies on the topic have focused on how information is selected and processed, rather than on the kind of information chosen. Based on the research on adult judgment heuristics indicating that adults fall prey to a number of judgment biases (see Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982), we were interested in whether or not pre-adolescents and adolescents were more likely to make choices based on individuating information, baserates, their own previous

experiences, or a variety of other possible kinds of information. Our own previous research indicates that by sixth grade, children are reasonably accurate at assessing the baserates of classmates' everyday behavior (Jacobs, Greenwald, & Bennett, under review), and that they are able to use baserate information to make social and object decisions if it is provided, although they are more likely to use individuating information when it is available (Jacobs & Potenza, 1991). Therefore, we expected even the young adolescents to understand the baserate information, but to be more likely to use the non-normative information. Due to previous research with adults, we also expected adults to model the use of non-normative information. We were interested in any changes in information-use that might occur with age or after interactions with other family members.

Current Study

The overarching goal of this study was to investigate decision-making in the context of the family during the transition from late childhood into adolescence. The focus was on information-selection, individual influence within the family, and the interaction processes involved in decision-making. The study was designed to answer five questions concerning socialization during this period: (1) What sources of information are most likely to be used to make everyday decisions? (2) Do family members differ on the sources of information they use? (3) Who has the most

influence on family decisions? (4) Does influence differ, depending on child's age, gender, or family configuration? and (5) Do the interaction processes differ, depending on child's age, gender, or family configuration?

Method

Subjects

Twenty-eight single-parent families and 40 two-parent families participated in the study. Participation was solicited in community groups (e.g., single-parent groups, church youth groups), and in schools. The mean age of the preadolescent group was 10.2 (N = 40), and the mean age of the adolescent group was 13.1 (N = 28).

Measures and Procedure

A trained experimenter met with each family in their home. The experimenter presented each participating family member with four decision tasks (selecting a bicyle, a snack, a movie, and a camp for the child) individually. Each person was provided with seven cards, each representing a different bicycle (snack, movie, camp), which they were asked to rank. Each card contained information about cost, peer preference, health/safety, prior experience, population baserates, child's preference, and advertising (see Table 1 for example). However, each card differed on one category of information. Thus, selection of any particular card indicated a choice based on that particular source of information.

Insert Table 1 about here

The rank-ordering of the cards was recorded by the experimenter, and was later used as the measure of information-use. After making individual decisions, family members were asked to reach consensus on the same tasks. After discussing their choices, a joint family decision for ranking the cards was reached and recorded. Thus, influence was measured by the correspondence between an individual's original decision, and the joint decision.

The discussions concerning the joint family decisions were tape-recorded for later coding and analysis. Although several coding systems have been employed to investigate family interaction (Bales, 1950; Condon, Cooper, & Grotevant, 1984; Hahlweg, 1988; Hauser, et al., 1987; Robin, 1988), none of them were specifically suited to our present purposes, therefore some aspects of Halweg's Interaction Coding System were incorporated into Bales' Interaction Process Analysis, and adapted for this study. The categories and a short explanation of each are presented in Table 2. Overall interrate reliability for the coding was 88.8% agreement, ranging between 80.9% and 95.8% for individual categories.

Insert Table 2 about here

Results

Information Used

Tables 3 and 4 provide descriptive information concerning the sources of information families used to make their decisions. As can be seen in Table 3, generally mothers and fathers ranked the child's preference as the most important piece of information when making all decisions. This was closely followed by information concerning health and prior experience.

Insert Table 3 about here

Children were more likely to use prior experience to make their first choice, followed by their own preferences. The joint family decisions reflected the use of the same three categories of information. It was notable that baserates and peer's preferences were seldom used, but when they were chosen, children were more likely to rank them first than were their parents.

Insert Table 4 about here

Table 4 breaks down the same first-rank information by decision task. In general, categories of information were ranked similarly across tasks. Exceptions were that cost was more important for the bike than the snack; peers were more important for the movie than other tasks; prior experience was more important for the snack than other tasks; and the child's preference was least important for the snack decision.

To test differential use of information by various family members, mean ranks for each source of information were calulated for each family member. Mean ranks were then compared using Friedman's two-way test. The average ranking for each category of information is presented in Table 5 by family configuration, and in Table 6 by age.

Insert Tables 5 and 6 about here

Two-parent families differed significantly in their use of information concerning peers' preferences (X^2 (2) = 12.81, p < .01), as did one-parent families (X^2 (1) = 9.85, p < .01). In both cases, the mean ranks suggest that children were more likely to use information concerning peers. In addition, mothers in one-parent families were significantly more likely to use information about their child's preference than their children were (X^2 (1) = 7.84, p < .01).

Comparisons of preadolescents and adolescents were limited to mothers and children to increase the number in the analysis. As illustrated in Table 6, the finding that mothers and children differ in their use of peer information held up in both age groups. In the preadolescent group, children were significantly less likely than mothers to use information concerning their own preferences, X^2 (1) = 6.89, p < .01; and in the older group, adolescents were significantly less likely to use health information than their mothers, X^2 (1) = p < .01.

Influence on Family Decisions

The measure of influence used in this analysis was the correspondence between individual family members' first choices and their, later, joint family decision. As can be seen in Table 7, mothers appeared to be most influential on the snack, bike, and camp tasks. However, children were most influential in making movie decisions. The most notable fact about Table 7 is that the joint task decision matches no individual first-choice decisions a large percentage of the time, suggesting that family decisions were often based on compromise.

Insert Table 7 about here

Differential influence was tested by calculating the average number of times each family member's first choice matched the joint family task, then performing 2 (child's gender) x 2 (child's age-group) x 2 (family configuation) ANOVAs on that score for each family member. No significant effects were found for mothers or fathers, suggesting that their influence does not depend on family configuration or on the sex or age of their children.

The findings were strikingly different for children. As can be seen in Figure 1, although mothers in one-parent families were no more likely to have their views influence the outcome of the joint decision than those in two-parent families, children in one-parent families had significantly

greater influence than those in two-parent families ($F(1,44) = 13.74$, $p < .001$).

Insert Figure 1 about here

In addition, children's influence depended on the interaction of their gender and their age-group, F (1, 44) = 8.462, $p < .01$. The interaction is illustrated in Figure 2. It is clear that preadolescent males had much more influence than preadolescent females, but that females' influence increased as they moved into adolescence while preadolescent males' influence declined as they made the same transition. Although the average influence scores were lower for children in two-parent families, the pattern was the same for both one- and two-parent families.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Conversation Analysis

The data reported in this section are preliminary because they are based on only 40 families (those currently coded). I present them to whet your appetite for more interesting things to come! I will present only descriptive data, but ultimately these will be analyzed by using sequential analyses.

The average number of comments made by family members in one- and two-parent families are presented in Table 8. In two-parent families, each person participates almost

equally. In single parent families, although the extra "talking time" made available by the absence of a third person is shared by both the mother and child, the mother takes a disproportionate share and talks more than the child. No differences in average number of comments were found between age groups or gender groups.

Insert Table 8 about here

Although the number of comments made in each category gives some idea of differential influence, a more fair measure of differences is to look at the proportion of one's comments that fell into a particular category. As can be seen in Table 9, the greatest proportion of comments for all participants fell into the categories of gives opinion, asks for opinion, and gives suggestions. Very few comments were power assertions or direct disagreements. However, greater proportions of parents' comments were asking for opinions and asking for suggestions, while children were more likely to given opinions and suggestions in response to their parents inquiries. Mothers and fathers looked similar throughout.

Insert Table 9 about here

When parents and children were compared, they differed on all categories except "agrees" and "asserts power" in

both one- and two-parent families. When one- and two-parent families were compared, they looked similar on most categories (See Table 10). However, children in single-parent families spent significantly more of the time they were commenting, giving suggestions (t (38) = 2.73, p < .05), and significantly less of the time asking for opinions (t (38) = 2.29, p < .05). No gender or age differences were found, however we were unable to test for interactions due to the small cell sizes.

Insert Table 10 about here

Discussion

The findings from this study provide important information concerning (1) the kinds of information families use to make everyday decisions and (2) the patterns of family influence on decision-making during the transition from preadolescence into adolescence. In general, we found that the child's preference was the most commonly endorsed source of information for parents, followed by health/safety considerations and prior experience. Children were most likely to use prior experience. Baserates and peer preference were less important for the tasks in this study. Family members agreed in their use of most sources of information. The major exception was peer preference, which was more likely to be used by children than their parents. In addition to peer preference, mothers of preadolescents and single mothers were more likely to use their child's

preference than were their children. Although preadolescents agreed with their mothers on the importance of health/safety information, adolescents thought it was less important than did their mothers.

Mothers' and fathers' influence did not differ by family configuration, child's gender, or child's age. However, children's influence was greatly affected by these variables. It appears that children in two-parent families have much less influence on everyday decisions than those in one-parent families. This is not too surprising on the surface, because the decision-making task is shared by two rather than three people so that the chances for influence increase in a one-parent family. What is surprising is that although children in one-parent families have greater influence, the mothers in these families do not. As the number of family members decreases, the chances for influence would be expected to be divided evenly among the remaining members, but this is not the case. Children's influence also depends on their age and gender. Preadolescent males have much greater influence on family decisions than females, but this reverses after the transition into adolescence. It appears that parents are much less likely to allow adolescent males to influence family decisions, no matter what the family configuration.

We found surprisingly few differences in our preliminary analysis of the content of the conversations due to age, gender, or family configuration. This may be due to

the small sample size at this point or to the nature of the tasks (the task goals elicited similar behaviors in everyone). However, it is notable that, although no differences in the proportion of comments in various categories were found, large differences in child's influence were found. This may indicate a lack of relationship between the process of family decision-making (as exemplified by their discussion) and the actual outcome or decision. If children's experiences don't differ on the kinds of input that they have, but differ on the influence that they have, they may be receiving very different kinds of messages from their decision-making experiences within the family. In our study, children in one-parent families, particularly older females and younger males, may see the process of giving opinions and suggestions as a way to influence decisions, while other children who have similar conversations with their parents, but lack influence may be learning very different things about how decisions get made. If these speculations are correct, we may need to rethink the role of parental influence in the development of decision-making.

Ultimately, media and public policy concerning adolescents' decision-behavior, particularly on health issues such as alcohol or drug use, may need to consider the family context in which children and adolescents learn to value different sources of information and different decision-making styles. For example, if adolescents do not

value health/safety information as an important aspect of decision-making, media and programming efforts may need to be aimed at other aspects of behavior (such as peers' preferences) to have an impact on this age group. These results also suggest that information needs to be targeted at specific gender and age groups. If males and females of different ages have different experiences concerning decision-making within the family, they may respond to health-related decision information in different ways. For example, if adolescent females are feeling efficacious about decision-making within the family, families may be good avenues for providing information about important decisions. However, adolescent males may feel that they have little impact on decisions concerning them within the family, so they may make their decisions outside of the family (e.g., without parental guidance or sanction). If we hope to influence adolescents as they make major choices in life (whether or not to take drugs, have an abortion, practice safe sex, go to college), we need to understand how adolescents are socialized as decision-makers for the more everyday, mundane decisions. Much of this socialization takes place within the family. More detailed research concerning decision-making within families during the critical transition into adolescence is needed to shed light on this important topic.

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Table 1
Example of decision task

Information Category	Example
Cost	Price is $200.00 $125.00
Peer Pref.	Child's friends think: "Not the hottest bike, but okay" "This is the bike to own!"
Health/ Safety	About as safe as most others Considered the safest bike on the market
Prior Exp.	Last time you bought this brand, it was okay it was a great bike
Baserates	A consumer survey rates this bike about average this as the best bike made in years
Individ. Information	A friend bought this brand and found it acceptable and thought it was the best
Child Pref.	Child thinks this bike is okay This is the bike the child wants

Table 2
Coding Categories for Conversations

Category	Description
Agrees	agreement or positive evaluation "Yeah, you're right" "I'll go along with you on that"
Gives suggestion	suggests an alternative or ranking "How about camp D?" "Can we put bike F next?"
Gives orientation or opinion	gives information, example, opinion "Bike A is too expensive" "Like the fruit roll-ups you had" "I chose this because I want to go with Mike"
Asks for orientation or opinion	asks for information, clarification, opinion "Would you go to any camp we sent you to?" "Why did you choose that one?" "So if Randy was going there, you'd want to go too?"
Asks for suggestion	asks another family member to suggest an alternative "Which one do you have next?"
Disagreement	directly or indirectly disagrees "No, Kim, F is the best choice here." "F? You don't read Consumer Reports!"
Asserts power	asserts authority or overrules "Chris, you are getting Bike E." "Well, you are overruled on this one."

Table 3
Percentage of first-ranks for each information category

	Respondent			
Information	Mom	Dad	Child	Joint
Cost	7%	3%	5%	6%
Peer Preference	1	5	16	6
Health/Safety	22	25	13	19
Prior Experience	21	21	26	23
Baserates	6	10	12	7
Individ. Info.	1	1	8	2
Child's Preference	41	35	21	37

Table 4
Percentage of first-ranks for each information category by task

	Respondent															
	Mom				Dad				Child				Joint			
Information	S	B	M	C	S	B	M	C	S	B	M	C	S	B	M	C
Cost	4	22	-	-	3	10	-	-	10	10	-	-	7	16	-	-
Peer Pref.	0	1	4	0	8	10	0	2	10	23	17	13	1	4	12	6
Health/Safety	25	18	22	22	21	10	23	45	12	13	6	22	22	16	21	18
Prior Exp.	51	4	14	15	47	13	15	11	36	28	16	19	52	11	16	12
Baserates	1	12	7	3	5	13	13	8	5	12	17	14	1	11	6	9
Individ. Info.	0	3	1	0	0	0	3	0	5	1	14	10	0	0	4	3
Child's Pref.	18	40	51	57	16	44	46	34	22	13	29	22	16	42	41	52

S = Snack, B = Bike, M = Movie, C = Camp,

Table 5
Average ranking for each category of information by family configuration

	Two-parent			One-parent	
Information	Mom	Dad	Child	Mom	Child
Cost	2.00	1.88	2.13	1.46	1.54
Peer Pref.	2.44	1.99	1.57*	1.81	1.19*
Health	1.74	2.00	2.26	1.34	1.66
Prior Exp.	1.97	2.14	1.89	1.42	1.58
Baserates	1.97	1.97	2.05	1.52	1.48
Individ. Info.	2.09	2.19	1.73	1.52	1.48
Child's Pref.	1.79	2.04	2.17	1.22	1.78*

* $p < .01$

Table 6
Average ranking for each category of information by age

	Pre-adolescent		Adolescent	
Information	Mom	Child	Mom	Child
Cost	1.52	1.48	1.42	1.58
Peer Pref.	1.84	1.16**	1.79	1.21*
Health	1.44	1.56	1.18	1.82*
Prior Exp.	1.52	1.47	1.34	1.66
Baserates	1.51	1.49	1.54	1.46
Individ. Info.	1.64	1.47	1.34	1.66
Child's Pref.	1.30	1.70*	1.40	1.60

* $p < .01$
** $p < .001$

Table 7
Agreement between individual family member's first-choice and joint family decision

	Respondent		
Task	Mom	Dad	Child
Snack	14.1%	5.4%	9.8%
Bike	23.9	9.8	10.9
Movie	8.7	8.7	16.3
Camp	12.0	8.7	14.1

Table 8
Average Number of Comments Made by Each Family Member

Family Configuration	Respondent		
	Mother	Father	Child
Two-parent	70.52	62.24	63.48
	36%	32%	32%
One-parent	83.87	--	70.33
	54%		46%

Table 9
Proportion of Comments in Each Category

Category	Respondent		
	Mother	Father	Child
Agrees	.13	.14	.13
Gives suggestion	.16	.23	.15*
Gives opinion	.38	.47	.42*
Asks for suggestion	.04	.01	.02*
Asks for opinion	.22	.07	.19*
Disagrees	.02	.02	.05
Asserts power	.00	--	.01

* $p < .05$

Table 10
Proportion of Comments in Each Category by Family Configuration

	One-parent		Two-parent		
Category	Mom	Child	Mom	Dad	Child
Agrees	.14	.13	.11	.14	.12
Gives suggestions	.16	.26*	.16	.15	.19*
Gives opinions	.36	.44	.40	.42	.49
Asks for suggestions	.04	.01	.03	.02	.01
Asks for opinions	.22	.04*	.22	.19	.09*
Disagrees	.02	.04	.02	.02	.04
Asserts power	.00	.00	.00	.01	.00